



# 'We Have Arrived'

## Long Island's Iranian American Jewish community, 30 years later



(Left): Saramarz Ases performs at Steppingstone Waterside theater, summer 2010, a concert co-sponsored by Great Neck's Persian Culture Committee.

(Right): Kamran Hekmati (left), chair of the Persian Culture Committee, with Neil Marrin, superintendent of Great Neck Parks District, at the opening of the summer concert.



By KAREN RUBIN

The Iranian American Jewish Federation (IAJF) of New York gala, scheduled for Nov. 9 at Leonard's of Great Neck, is the one event that brings together a diverse community that outsiders refer to as "Persian."

The community — some 15,000 in the greater New York area — spans the spectrum in terms of Jewish practice and politics, but there is one issue that

unites them: Israel.

In fact, the main mission of the IAJF is to show "solidarity with the State of Israel." Since it was founded in 2002, the IAJF has hosted eight annual dinners and raised nearly

\$17.5 million that has benefited over 100 organizations in Israel that support a variety of causes including the Israel Defense Forces soldiers and their families, victims of terror, hospitals, educational institutions and soup kitchens. IAJF also allocated funds in support of Jews in Vienna and around the world.

Next month will mark the ninth annual dinner, and despite the weak economy that has hit the community as it has the nation, the

Federation is hoping to raise another \$2 million. The difference this year is that a portion of those funds will also be allocated to help local families in need, according to Shahram Yaghouzadeh, president

Iranian immigrants who were born here, thirty years after the revolution. ... Traditionally many didn't believe in voting because there was nobody to vote for, or people didn't think they could make a difference in elections," explained Yaghouzadeh.

But that is changing. The Iranian Jewish community is emerging as a political force, especially in local politics, where many sit on village and special districts boards such as the Great Neck Library.

**Jews from Eastern Europe settled in the tenements of Lower Manhattan, worked in sweat shops and founded the labor movement. Iranian Jews came as professionals and entrepreneurs and settled in wealthy suburbs.**

### Conforming, yet also defying stereotypes

Many of the Iranian American Jews follow a path to professions — lawyers, doctors — and practice in the mainstream world. That is a key reason why the Iranian American Jewish Federation has been so successful raising \$2 million a year for Israeli causes.

In that respect, Jacqueline Harounian has conformed, but in many respects, she defies stereotypes of the community.

Her family did not come to America with the fall of the Shah; her parents came as students, separately, more than 50 years ago, met here, married and stayed. Harounian's father came to the U.S. on a scholarship; her mother grew up in Forest Hills because her grandfather came to this country to practice medicine when Harounian's mother was only 9 years old.

"In their families, they had a sense that Iran wasn't hospitable to Jews — they were pioneers," she said.

They first settled in New Jersey and came to Long Island in the early 1970s. Harounian grew up in



Jacqueline Harounian, an attorney, married at age 20, but returned to school when her son was 9 months old. She says that although Iranian Jews do marry non-Persian Jews, intermarriage is less than 1 percent and "out-of-wedlock pregnancies or co-habitation" are not a problem in her community because of "the power of the stigma. ... These are all very positive things, all a function of the close-knit community."

Old Westbury, where there was no Persian community; the family moved to Great Neck around 1990, when she got married, because there was an established Persian community.

The early Iranian Jews came to Great Neck as other groups did before, "because the schools were good, it was a train ride to Manhattan — a lot worked in garment industry when they first came here, fabrics and garments, then real estate and jewelry. They were all tradesmen. And they came because there was a well-established Jewish community."

At first, Harounian followed a traditional path. "I grew up in a very conservative household, became engaged at 19, married at 20."

But then she took a very different path. She had a 9-month-old son and, instead of staying at home, which is more typical of most of the other Iranian women (even today, a function of tradition but also affluence), she went to law school and then went to work.

And coming from a community where the divorce rate is about 5 percent (compared to 50 percent for American marriages), there is some irony in the fact she became a matrimonial attorney and is now a partner

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of IAJF.

The dinner provides a convenient marker with which to take stock of how far the community has come since the great wave of immigration from Iran some 30 years ago that followed the Iranian Revolution, the fall of the Shah and the ascendancy of the Islamic state.

The emergence of an organization devoted to raising money for Israel is indicative of what the Iranian American Jewish community has achieved. The very fact that each year the keynote speaker has been an ambassador or minister from Israel demonstrates the group's importance and clout. (This year's guest will be Meron Reuben, Israel's ambassador to the U.N.)

"We've become very successful in American society — that's how we can be a force," Yaghouzadeh said.

"First we were concerned about creating a synagogue, then cultural organizations. Little by little, we have become more sophisticated, more settled here, following the American way and setting up philanthropic organizations as well as civic organizations like 30 Years After," he said. Yaghouzadeh added that the IAJF doesn't even have a Web site "because we try to stay low-key," in contrast to the newer organizations.

"But 30 Years After, established two years ago, is run by children of

Yet while the earlier wave of Jews, mainly Ashkenazi from Eastern Europe, embraced progressive politics — and Great Neck, in particular, has been a bastion for Democrats — the Iranian Jewish community has broken that pattern.

"American Jews are traditionally liberal and Democrat. However, we are really not affiliated with any parties in general and we typically vote for who is good, number one, for Israel and, number two, who is good for us personally. Though some are registered Republican and some registered Democrats, but not hard core on either side, typically, more conservative toward the right of the center," said Yaghouzadeh.

While the Iranian American Jews are hardly monolithic, they tend to support candidates who seem the strongest supporters of Israel; many also embrace Republican themes of tax cuts and small government.

The difference is not surprising: The earlier wave of Jews, from Eastern Europe, were exposed to the socialist and progressive movements under way there; they settled in the tenements of Lower Manhattan, took jobs in sweat shops and founded the labor movement before their more successful scions moved to the suburbs.

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**'Every week, children see their extended family at Shabbat dinner. That is enormously positive — there is emotional, financial, childcare support. American culture doesn't have this — families are far flung, the children settle far away.'**

# A bridge between two worlds

To a great extent, the ability to bridge the two worlds — to keep traditions intact while at the same time blending into the mainstream — was largely the achievement of people like Raymond Iryami.

Iryami emigrated from Iran in 1982, at age 10. “I came with my mom to visit family for a few months; circumstances changed and I never went back. My brother had to escape Iran. But my Mom had to go back because the government was giving my father a hard time because he was the guarantee of our return. My family was separated for five years,” Iryami recalls.

When he arrived, he spoke the equivalent of first-grade English, and grew up in Rego Park, Queens before moving to Great Neck in 1989.

“We had an Iranian and a Jewish community in Rego Park, but people who knew I was Jewish couldn’t believe I was Iranian, and those who knew I was Iranian couldn’t believe I was Jewish — they thought I was Israeli. It was difficult to explain, especially in the 1980s, to be Iranian Jewish; it was a foreign concept to them at the time, especially because of the hostage crisis. ... Here in Great Neck, if you were Iranian, you must be Jewish,” he explains.

At that time, the Iranian community had grown quite large, quite fast and, like so many immigrant communities, was very insular, causing many in the wider community, even the Jewish community, to regard the Persians as “outsiders” who were taking over “their” community.

Iryami was different. He joined the *Great Neck Record* as a reporter in 1991, and very soon after, was literally tapped by the editor, William Dobkin, and officials including the n - S t a t e Assemblyman Tom DiNapoli to be a “bridge.”

Iryami says, “There were a lot of people building bridges, but I was the youngest there, and they figured I had a toehold, because I had a position in the newspaper, that I had the ability to bring people together. I was 19 at the time and initially had no interest. Leave me alone. I was in school, commuting 100 miles each day between home,

and Stony Brook.”

Many of the Iranian Jewish children attended nearby colleges so they could commute, but Iryami says, “It never occurred to me to live at school. My parents had only just come to the United States. Our family was finally together. ... But when I went to law school, I wanted to go away.” He attended Fordham, and lived in Manhattan.

One of Iryami’s biggest achievements was helping to establish the Persian Culture Committee, which sponsored and organized programs at the Great Neck Library. One of those programs was the annual celebration of Yalda, the longest night of the

that Bill Dobkin and Tom DiNapoli and all the officials hoped for in terms of integration have begun to take place, maybe not in the exact way they expected because the community is a lot more diverse, politically and socially,” he says.

Has the Iranian Jewish community here emerged with taking the best of both worlds? According to Iryami, “to varying degrees.”

“We learn from the lessons of prior immigrant groups that came before us. Every generation benefits from what came before.”

But, he acknowledges, “every parent struggles. It is harder for Iranian Jewish parents because there are more family constraints.”

**‘People who knew I was Jewish couldn’t believe I was Iranian, and those who knew I was Iranian couldn’t believe I was Jewish — they thought I was Israeli. In the 1980s, being Iranian Jewish was difficult to explain.’**

year, which introduced the wider community to Persian culture and helped to dissipate the mystery, while at the same time preserving the heritage for a generation born and raised in America. The committee also organizes a summer concert at Steppingstone Park, in conjunction with the Great Neck Park District, featuring a popular Persian entertainer. The Great Neck Arts Center has also held programs on Persian culture.

Iryami continued to be out in the political world and be a bridge. He joined a major municipal law firm in Great Neck and was appointed by Tom Suozzi’s administration to the Nassau County Human Rights Commission.

Now he has his own law firm, based in Manhattan, representing health care professionals and providers, and is president of the New York chapter of the Iranian American Bar Association. He also sits on the Village of Great Neck’s Planning Board.

Iryami points to greater participation in local politics. “It shows that the community is more settled, more active. A lot of things



**Attorney Raymond Iryami, who immigrated to the U.S. when he was 10 and only spoke first-grade level English, became a reporter for the Great Neck Record at age 19. He was quickly tapped by the editor and officials including then-Assemblyman Tom DiNapoli to be a “bridge” between the Persian and American Jewish communities.**

home,” says Iryami.

That means it is more political than 10-15 years ago, as well.

“A lot have become citizens, are registered to vote, are active and are participating in local elections in much greater numbers than ten, fifteen or twenty years ago, and that’s wonderful,” he muses.

But, he says, the national level is complicated. “Iranian Jews tend to support the incumbents, and in Great Neck, that means Democrats. But we are not reliably Democrat or Republican. At the national level the biggest issues over the decade have been support for Israel. That’s the one issue that is most likely to predict voting patterns, probably bigger than the other issues.”

Iryami adds, “That has cut both ways — Bush was seen as pro-Israel and got a lot of support from the Iranian Jewish community, but George H.W. Bush was not seen as good for Israel and got very little.”

—K.R.

On the other hand, it is easier because of the large support system — the extended family. It is not uncommon for grandparents to live with or nearby their family, and for Shabbat gatherings to include multiple families.

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# Arrived

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The Iranian Jews had no such experience with socialism. They come from a country that was dominated by a despot, an oppressive regime where wealth had privileges, and the immigrants themselves came as professionals, business owners and entrepreneurs.

Yaghoubzadeh, who runs his own IT consulting firm, came to the U.S. in 1972, when he was 17, and knew only a little English. "I came as a student, temporarily, then ended up staying. For those who came when they were older and had deeper roots in the homeland, it was more unsettling and difficult. Some are still struggling," he said.

The largest concentration of Iranian Jews in the greater New York area live in Great Neck, where there are now nine synagogues established by the Iranian Jewish community. There are also pockets in Queens — in Rego Park and Forest Hills — as well as in Roslyn, Brookville and other places on Long Island. However, while New York's Iranian Jewish community is significant in its numbers (15,000), it is not the largest in the U.S.: Los Angeles' Iranian Jewish community is larger by at least four times, with some estimates at five times.

In many ways, Iranian Jews have followed the same trajectory as the waves of immigrants who preceded them on these shores. Like all the others, Iranian Jews have had to wrestle the pull of traditional culture against the push to become Americanized, which for some means adopting the liberal, egalitarian mores that would seem alien in the home country.

Like earlier immigrant groups

the Iranian community's initial defense was to be insular, and set up walls to attempt to keep out the alien ways and keep the next generation inside.

But now the community is in its first and second generation born in America, and the question arises: To what extent has it retained its traditional framework or been reshaped by the often competing mores of American culture?

The answer is: The Iranian Jewish community is less insular but quite intact. In fact, it seems to defy the experience of most other immigrant groups who, by the second generation, have scattered and foregone the language and traditions of their forebears.

And that has a lot to do with Great Neck, which had a large Ashkenazi Jewish population when the Iranian Jews first arrived, and



(Left): A collage of people in Israel who benefit from the monies raised by the Iranian American Jewish Federation at its annual dinner.

(Below): This year's gala will be addressed by Meron Reuben, Israel's ambassador to the U.N.



mer rather than sleep-away, and to local colleges so they could live at home, more go to camp and away to college, though most still stay in the Northeast and return after graduation, even if they live in their own apartment in Manhattan.

Two "younger" Iranian Jewish Americans who have navigated the bridge between the two cultures are Raymond Iryami and Jacqueline Harounian. Their respective successes are detailed in "A bridge between two worlds," page 9, and "Conforming, yet also defying stereotypes," page 8.

**'American Jews are traditionally liberal and Democrat. We are really not affiliated with any parties in general and we typically vote for who is good, No. 1, for Israel and, No. 2, who is good for us personally.'**

who welcomed their brothers and sisters from the Middle East.

"When the Sephardic community came, Rabbi Wolf of the Great Neck Synagogue welcomed them with open arms, and let them have their own service in the synagogue's gym," relates Rabbi Yamin Levy, of the Iranian Jewish Center, Bet Hadassah Synagogue, "and Temple Israel also."

Indeed, many of the Persian community have elected to join Temple Israel, a Conservative synagogue where men and women sit together, something that does not exist in the Persian synagogues.

Though outsiders paint the Sephardi community with a single

brush of "Persian," there is great diversity within it: Mashadi Jews, who came from a region in Iran where they had to keep Jewish practice a secret for 100 years, and non-Mashadi; there are those who maintain the Sephardi traditions and those who have embraced the more

The problem of Persian heritage versus American, Yaghoubzadeh said, "has been resolved for many, many years. Our community is now accepted and a known quantity, and the children are blending in — if not the older members of the community. The younger generation go

egalitarian style of worship of the Ashkenazi tradition in Conservative and Reform synagogues, both of which are American innovations and don't exist in Iran, as well as traditional politics.

to American schools, public schools, go to work in a professional environment. ... We have become part of the fabric," he added.

Whereas early on, the children tended to go to day camps in sum-

## Stereotypes

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with Wisselman, Harounian & Associates, P.C., Great Neck. (She was just named by *New York Super Lawyers* magazine as one of the outstanding attorneys in the New York Metro area for 2010.)

"I was always attracted to family law," she says "A lot of what I do is psychology, common sense." She prefers to resolve issues by mediation rather than through litigation. She also does a lot of speaking on domestic violence, which affects every demographic group.

Harounian was also was a trailblazer, becoming the first woman to serve as president of SHAI (Sephardic Heritage Alliance Inc.), the Iranian cultural organization.

She observes how the community has changed in some respects and resisted change in others.

"It's changing. The community can be insular at times — or seem so — especially when you hear people speaking their native tongue. (I am fluent in Farsi, but when I went to Columbia I learned how to read/write Farsi there.) I can see both sides: I can see why people on the outside see insularity. I belong to

Temple Israel. ... I wanted a more egalitarian environment. I enjoy the diversity, I enjoy my children going to public school, and having more diverse friends," she says.

The Persian community has been able to preserve its heritage within a radically different American society, says Harounian, because "Persian families are very, very close-knit. It's not uncommon that children get to see their grandparents, uncles, cousins every week. Shabbat dinners are a reality in almost every Persian Jewish household, so every week, children see their extended family. That is enormously positive — there is emotional, financial, childcare support. You can't calculate the benefit. American culture doesn't have this — families are far flung, the children settle far away."

The tendency to keep children nearby when they go to college is "definitely loosening up. Today's parents are open minded, kids go to sleep-away camp, socialize, go to colleges all over, travel abroad. ... A lot has to do with how strict the family is.

"A generation ago, people got married much, much earlier, and all the families knew one another; marriages were not quite arranged, but encouraged and endorsed by families. Now there are more marriages

outside the Iranian community, but definitely within the Jewish community. Less than one percent marry outside ... and still to my knowledge, I am not aware of out-of-wedlock pregnancies or even cohabitation. That's the power of the stigma — stigma attached to cohabitation outside marriage, or marrying non-Jews. These are all very positive things, all a function of the close-knit community," Harounian explains.

Reflecting on where the community has come, she says, "The Persian Jewish community is not monolithic, very diverse, many sub-groups in the community, many degrees of religious observance.

"The Iranian American Jewish Federation is the first to bring together a lot of leaders from all these different groups, with a commitment to philanthropy and a singular purpose to help Israel and the Jewish community. It is the only organization that can truly say that's their mission. I think the Persian Jewish community had reached the point where it was ready to have such an organization, and the organization has been very successful. It has wonderful leadership ... board members are passionate about what they are doing." —K.R.



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